DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 211 EC 141 163

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TITLE Paperwork in Special Education as Viewed by California Educators.

INSTITUTION San Juan Unified School District, Carmichael, Calif.

SPONS AGENCY California State Dept. of Education, Sacramento.
PUB DATE 81
GRANT 34-67447-80-3293-7100
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 16, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Compliance (Legal); *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Legislation; Recordkeeping; Special Education; *State Legislation; *State Standards; State Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *California

ABSTRACT

The statewide (California) study reviewed the federal and state requirements for special education paperwork. It analyzed paperwork used in 37 school districts to identify data items in compliance with or in excess of requirements. Interviews on special education paperwork with 120 special educators were summarized. Based upon the study, two viewpoints toward paperwork were identified: the legal and the educational planning. Educators with the legal viewpoint used paperwork as documentation against possible suits, while the educational planners used the paperwork to assist in the planning process. Teachers found the paperwork useful, but they did not like to complete the forms. (Author/DB)

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PAPERWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AS VIEWED BY CALIFORNIA EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This statewide study reviewed the federal and state requirements for special education paperwork. It analyzed paperwork used in thirty-seven school districts to identify data items in compliance with or in excess of requirements. It summarized interviews on special education paperwork with one hundred twenty special educators.

Based upon the study, two viewpoints toward paperwork were identified: the legal and the educational planning. The legal viewpoint administrators used paperwork as documentation against possible suits, while the educational planners used the paperwork to assist in the planning process. Teachers found paperwork useful, but they did not like to complete the forms.

The study on which this paper is based was conducted during the academic school year 1979-80 under the auspices of the Special Studies supported by Grant No. 34-67447-80-3293-7100 between the California State Department of Education and the San Juan Unified School District.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent those of the California State Department of Education or the San Juan Unified School District.

PAPERWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AS VIEWED BY CALIFORNIA EDUCATORS

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In California, as well as in the rest of the nation, paperwork is perceived as a major problem. It is no surprise, therefore, that the paperwork associated with special education has also been viewed as a problem. This study attempted to determine the problems associated with special education paperwork in California.

The study had three phases: (1) to identify the minimal number of paperwork items specified in federal and state legislation and regulations, (2) to analyze the extent to which forms used in California school districts included and/or exceeded these specified items, and (3) to interview special education personnel on their perceptions about paperwork.

Identification of Paperwork Requirements

In the first phase of the study, the federal and state legislation and regulations related to special education processes were reviewed. References to "written notices," "descriptions," "written records," "consent in writing," and "written statements" were keys to the various types of paperwork which were required in special education. These types of paperwork were commonly referred to by the process involved--such as a "referral form," an "assessment plan," an "assessment report" and an "individualized education program."

In addition to these process-linked references to forms, specific items were identified as information to be considered during the referral-assessment-placement-review process. Many of these items required documentation in order to verify that the proper procedures were used, that due process was observed and that all of the individualized education program elements were included.

The interviews reported in this paper were conducted by Stanley W. Barrick, San Juan Unified School District.

A total of thirty-six items or topics were identified within the federal codes as requiring some type of documentation. (These items and their code references are presented in Appendix A.) California legislation, which has been revised three times within the past ten years, contained some of these items (although occassionaly referred to by different terminology), contained an additional fourteen items requiring documentation, bringing the total requirement to sixty items.

Analysis of California Paperwork

Because California had no state guidelines for forms or lists of suggested items to be included on the special education forms, each agency (district, county, or combination of districts and/or counties) was responsible for determining the data items which it would require on paperwork forms and for the forms design. The second phase of this study, therefore, was to collect samples of the paperwork forms currently in use throughout California.

Requests for paperwork forms were sent to a total of forty-three agencies. Of the thirty-seven respondents, eighteen agencies were those organized under California's "Master Plan for Special Education," and the other nineteen were operating under P.L. 94-142 plus some specific Calfornia regulations. Each of these agencies, therefore was responsible for documenting at least the minimal federal items. The Master Plan agencies had, in addition, the fourteen items unique to California.

The paperwork documents received from the thirty-seven agencies were analyzed and charted item by item. Only eight of the minimal thirty-six federal items were referred to specifically on the documents of all thirty-seven agencies. The remaining items were not included by one or more of the agencies. (The number and percent of agencies including each item in its paperwork are presented in Appendix A.)

Despite these lacks, each of the agencies had many more items included on its documentation forms than were seemingly required. The range of collected items on the basic paperwork forms was from seventy-one to one hundred eighty-one items. When these additional items were listed and studied, it was found that these additions were either information which was used for program administration, or that the items were carry-overs from previous legislation or repeats of information with different headings. It seems that, with the many changes in state legislation and the different wordings used in state and federal codes, some agencies decided to err by over-documentation rather than by simplification.

A further analysis to identify the additional non-required items revealed that many of these items were student identifiers which were repeated on more than one form. These are examples of the most commonly-used student identifiers:

ID number	Sex
Grade	Address
Phone	Teacher
Room number	School
Parent name	Parent address

The information which was judged to be useful in the administration of the special education program included such items as given below:

Home school code number	School of attendance
Teacher of placement	District of residence
Transportation needs	Foster home status
Interpreter needed	In special education previously
Years at present school	Last grade retained

The remaining information which was found on paperwork documents was judged to be included because of mis-interpretation of federal/state requirements, or the continuation of items previously required, and/or to protect the agency in the case of a fair hearing. Such information included:

Pre-assessment data	Committee vote
Primary need	Learning style
Teaching strategies	Materials/resources
Developmental history	Personality assessment
Immunization record	Doctor's name
Chairman's signature	Goal priority

It was clear that, while some agencies could reduce their paperwork requirements by reducing the number of items collected, many agencies still did not include all of the required items of information.

Interviews with Agency Personnel

The third phase of this study was to hold interviews in each of ten agencies. These agencies were selected to represent the Master Plan and P.L. 94-142 groups within California (five from each), and to represent the geographic diversity within the state. These interviews were held over a three week period during the spring of 1980. In each agency interviews were held with the program director, the person responsible for data collection, two program specialists (sub-administrators), two special class teachers, two resource room teachers or similar persons, two designated instruction specialists (such as speech therapists), and two regular school administrators supervising special education teachers.

The interview schedule included questions concerning the construction of the paperwork forms (directions, legibility, space, duplication, teacher input in construction), time estimates (for each of the identified process documents), the usefulness of the paperwork (for delivering the most appropriate education to each child, for daily instruction, for helping to focus the team meeting), the suggestions for changes (in laws and regulations, in the actual paperwork) and attitudes toward paperwork (in terms of the processes documented and in terms of actually completing the forms).

The interview schedule was pilot tested in the local school district in order to determine how easily agency personnel would be able to respond to the questions. The information gathered from this local tryout made it easier to analyze the responses from other agency personnel, as well as providing information for local forms revisions.

Construction of forms--In general, agency personnel approved of the paperwork construction. They found that the forms were clear and legible, and that they provided space for the necessary information. About half, however, commented that there was some repetition on the forms which could be eliminated. Usually this repetition included some of the student identifiers. Of the thirty percent making suggestions for deletion, many of the suggestions were to delete items which were required by state or federal codes. The two steps which helped agency personnel with the paperwork were when the agency provided (1) complete directions and (2) sufficient inservice training on how to complete the forms.

Time estimates--The estimates on time required to complete paperwork forms made by the special educators were difficult to obtain and were recognized to be based upon subjective reports. Most persons had to be helped to distinguish the time spent in one of the processes (such as assessment) from the time actually spent completing a form. Nevertheless, a distinction was made between the process and the paperwork, and the paperwork time was found to take between six and twelve percent of the total processing time. This was true for the assessment process and for team meetings held for placement or review. This division of time also held true across students, from mildly handicapped to more severely handicapped.

Because of an interest in paperwork "bottlenecks," educators were asked about the bottlenecks in the paperwork and meeting process. The identified bottlenecks were: (1) the time required in all parent contacts (for approval, for meetings, etc.), (2) the amount of time spent in student assessment, (3) negotiating meeting times with all team members, (4) any team meeting, and (5) the high rate of student mobility. None of these bottlenecks could be affected by changes in paperwork. All of these problems were greater in urban agencies.

Usefulness of paperwork--The only type of paperwork judged as being useful for daily instruction was the individualized education program itself, with almost three-fourths of the teachers mentioning that the goals and objectives were useful in daily instruction. Teachers indicated that the objectives which were used the most were those which were the most specific, and that more general objectives were less useful in daily instruction.

The usefulness of paperwork at the team meetings was noted by well over half of those interviewed. In some cases the paperwork format provided an agenda for the team meeting. A repeated observation was that documenting the assessment focused attention on the results rather than on subjective observations. Teachers and administrators mentioned that the paperwork completion was more of a problem for the inexperienced teacher than for the more experienced one.

Attitudes toward paperwork--When it came to actually filling out the paperwork forms, fewer than half of the teachers were positive. The overwhelming majority, however, believed that the processes documented by the paperwork were essential to ensuring that all those who should be involved in the placement and service of special education children had taken part in planning for the most appropriate educational program.

Administrative usefulness--Of particular interest were the reactions of California educators to the paperwork forms used in documenting the special education process. One of the questions asked of administrators was "How do you think the cost of data collection relates to its usefulness?" The initial responses from administrators suggested that they equated cost with time. When they began talking about the amount of time spent on paperwork, it was apparent that they were unaware of the actual time reported by teachers for the process of data collection as distinct from the time spent in completing the "paperwork" itself. In terms of usefulness, nearly half stated that the data collected on the various paperwork forms were useful in helping to identify children who required service, in assuring that parent rights were considered, and in providing for a measure of accountability in the services to be provided.

It was in responding to the above question that the administrators began to delineate two different positions. One group stressed the usefulness of the paperwork in terms of its "cost effectiveness" in preventing legal liability. Although they resented the costs involved, they compared the paperwork to an insurance policy which protects against the possibility of a due process suit, or, at least, provides the information which is needed in such cases. Even though their experience was that only a very small percentage of students ever required such documentation, they were willing to spend considerable amounts of time to insure against such an eventuality.

The other group of administrators, while recognizing that some items on the paperwork assured against liability, tended to emphasize the usefulness of the documentation. These administrators mentioned such changes as streamlining the forms to provide more cost-effective data collection. They reported that the careful assessment documentation led to providing more effective service to more students than had been the case previously. They stressed that team judgments were based upon such assessment findings rather than on the individual teacher judgments of the past.

Another question along similar lines was "To what extent do the data that you are required to collect in special education relate to the educational decisions that you make?" More than half of the administrators indicated that the information collected on the paperwork forms supported the decisions made for placement and service. Even the one-third who reported that only in some cases did the information support the decision indicated that the information was important to the educational decisions; but that the decision of the parent was not based upon the information presented. Only a few (eight percent) reported that the data collected were not useful, but were only collected to comply with legislative mandates.

It seemed from the answers given by these California educators that there were two major views expressed toward the usefulness of paperwork in special education. These viewpoints have been designated as the "legal" and the "educational planning" viewpoints. When either of these viewpoints was held by the school or program administrator, it tended to influence the viewpoints of the other special education personnel within the agency.

Conclusions

Paperwork compliance--From the analysis of the paperwork forms submitted by the thirty-seven agencies in California, it was found that many of the items judged to be required were not included on the forms. Whether the content of these items would have been written on the forms for documentation is not known. What was apparent was that some of these items were not included as headings or specified items by some of the special education agencies.

In defense of these agencies, it was noted that the legal requirements have to be interpreted for both federal and state codes. Furthermore, the requirements within California have changed several times during the past decade. While some consideration was given to developing forms for statewide use or as examples to be considered by the local agencies, these were never approved for distribution to the agencies.

Given the care which was shown in the forms submitted by some of the agencies, it was clear that some of the agencies had gone to considerable effort to develop paperwork forms which they believed would both meet the legal requirements and serve their own administrative needs.

Paperwork reduction--From the study of the items which were duplicated on the forms used by each agency, it was found that more information was being repeated than necessary. Inasmuch as some type of student information system was being adopted by most agencies, it is hoped that some of the repetitive student identification information would be entered into an information system where it would be available as needed, and thus be eliminated from current forms.

Paperwork usefulness-- Where paperwork was viewed primarily as an unavoidable evil, the emphasis was on legal compliance. When this was seen as the purpose of paperwork, it was more probable that questionnable or duplicate items would be included in the paperwork--not for what they could contribute for the child--but for their possible use as a protection against a lawsuit. Items verifying due process details were included not to help the child or the parent, but to protect the agency.

Fortunately for special education in California, the majority of educators in this study supported an educational planning viewpoint rather than the legal viewpoint. They viewed the paperwork as an administrative and organizational tool which provided a framework to support proper assessment and educational planning. These educators tended to be in favor of minimizing the total number of data items required on the paperwork forms, maintaining only enough to effectively administer the process and to ensure sufficient information for making good educational decisions.

APPENDIX A

Paperwork Items Required by the Code of Federal Regulations and Their Specification on Forms of California Agencies

Paperwork Form/ Specific Item	Code of Federal Regulations Part 121a	California Agencies Specifying Item	
		Number	Percent
Referral/Assessment*			
1. Referral/assessment rationale	504; 505 (a,2)	37	100%
2. Assessment procedures	504	33	89%
3. Parents' native language	504	37	100%
4. Ethnicity	530 (b)	22	59%
5. Pupil's primary language	532 (a,1)	37	100%
(Possible assessment areas:)			
6. Health	532 (3,f)	24	65%
7. Vision	532 (3,f)	18	49%
8. Hearing	532 (3,f)	25	68%
9. Social status	532 (3,f)	26	70%
10. Emotional status	532 (3,f)	15	41%
11. General intelligence	532 (3,f)	24	65%
12. Academic performance	532 (3,f)	27	73%
13. Communicative status	532 (3,f)	24	65%
14. Motor abilities	532 (3,f)	24	65%
15. Assessment consent	534	36	97%
Placement/IEP			
16. Parent notification	345 (a)	37	100%
17. Persons in attendance	344 (a)	31	84%
18. Findings of assessment	505 (a); 533	37	100%
19. Eligibility	533 (b)	9	24%
20. Disability category	124; 125; 127	23	62%
21. Birthdate (age)	123; 125; 127	37	100%
22. Programs/services required	346 (a)	36	97%
23. Least restrictive environment	533 (a,4)	26	70%
24. Placement rationale	552	26	70%
25. School of service	522 (a,3)	35	95%
26. Service initiation date	346 (d)	33	89%
27. Service duration	346 (d)	31	84%
28. Extent of integration	346 (d)	26	70%
29. Present levels of performance	346 (a)	37	100%
30. Annual goals	346 (b)	37	100%
31. Short term objectives	346 (b)	35	95%
32. Objective evaluation procedures	346 (e)	35	95%
33. Meeting date	342 (b,2)	29	78%
34. Annual review	552 (a,1)	14	38%
35. Parental consent/signature	504 (b,1)	30	81%
36. Date of consent	504 (b,1)	23	62%

* In California, the term "assessment" is used in place of "evaluation" when referring to a study of a student's educational needs.